

**THE INDEPENDENT COMPANIES OF
FOREIGNERS AT HAMPTON, VIRGINIA,
JUNE 1813**

by
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On 25 June 1813, a few days after the abortive attack on Craney Island — a vain attempt to destroy the United State frigate *Constellation* — the British, under the command of Sir Sidney Beckwith, landed at Hampton, Virginia. The attacking force consisted of Royal Marines, with some of their artillery, the 102nd Regiment of Foot, and two companies of greenclad, French-speaking infantry. It is the last-mentioned companies that are the focus of this article.

Over the years there has been considerable confusion about the proper designation of these companies. Beckwith's own after-action report refers to them as Canadian Chasseurs. One British historian of the Napoleonic Wars called them the Chasseurs Britanniques. Charles Hamilton Smith, on the staff of the Adjutant General of the British army, comes closest with his reference to them as the French Independent Companies. However, documents in the War Office papers at the Public Record Office, London, designate them as the Independent Companies of Foreigners.¹

Early in July 1812 directions were given for enlisting French deserters into companies, but it appears both deserters and prisoners of war were recruited. Each company was to consist of one captain, two first lieutenants, three second lieutenants, a sergeant major, two buglers, eight sergeants, eight corporals and 142 privates. Most of the enlisted men appear to have been French, while the officers, with the exception of Captain Silvester Smith, had French names and presumably were Emigres or French-speaking Swiss.²

On 11 November 1812 the First Company, under the command of Captain Smith, was declared ready for active service and on 3 January 1813 it was ordered to embark for Bermuda. The Second Company, commanded by a Captain Monduet, was ordered to Bermuda on 13 March 1813. They arrived there after a forty-six day voyage. From the reports submitted by Colonel Beckwith, it is apparent he began to have problems with these companies from the outset, including insubordination and a mutiny on parade.³

The expedition for the Chesapeake Bay sailed from Bermuda on 8 June and ten days later they joined the fleet commanded by Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren, commander-in-chief of the American and West Indian Stations.

Despite his misgivings about these Foreigners, Colonel Beckwith used them against Craney Island. This landing attempt, on 22 June, was repulsed with losses to the attackers. One of the boats bearing men from the Independent Companies capsized, and despite later denials, the British were convinced that the

Americans had deliberately attempted to massacre the drowning men, which may partially explain the outrages later committed at Hampton.⁴

Early on the morning of 25 June the British landed at Hampton. Their objective was the destruction of the batteries the Americans were believed to be erecting to protect their gunboats then operating in Hampton Roads. The American militia was quickly driven off and the town secured. While the British regulars were busy with the American militia, the men of the Independent Companies began to plunder, murder, and rape. From the scanty reports available, it seems that Captain Smith asked that they be reembarked before they could commit further atrocities. In any event, the entire British force was reembarked that evening after the destruction of American munitions of war.⁵

An American protest to Admiral Warren led to a closer look into the depredations committed by the Foreigners and it was subsequently recommended they be sent to Halifax for disposal. The Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia, Lieutenant General Sir John C. Sherbrooke, was warned by Beckwith about these troops. They were landed at Halifax, where they were again a problem, but by then it was decided to ship them back to England. By early autumn they were on their way to Britain. The Foreigners continued in their troublesome ways, and in consequence they were disbanded in May 1814 and returned to France.⁶

One writer on foreign troops in the British army during the Napoleonic era describes these two companies as, "the worst of all the foreign corps."⁷ From what little we know about them, he was undoubtedly correct.

1.—G. Auchinleck, *A History of the War between Great Britain and the United States of America during the Years, 1812, 1813 & 1814* (London, 1972), p. 277. The British historian William James refers to these companies as the *Chasseurs Britanniques*. *Ibid.*, p. 277. A schematic entitled "Foreign Corps 1813 & 1814," found in Charles Hamilton Smith's *Costume of the Army of the British Empire* (London, 1815), uses the term French Independent Companies. The Public Record Office, *An Alphabetical Guide to Certain War Office and Other Military Records Preserved in the Public Record Office* (1963 reprint; London, 1931), p. 461, uses the designation Independent Companies of Foreigners.

2.—J. Mackay Hiteman & Alice Sorby, "Independent Foreigners or Canadian Chasseurs," *Military Affairs*, Volume XXVI (1961), p. 13.

3.—*Ibid.*, p. 13-14.

4.—*Ibid.*, p. 14.

5.—*Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

6.—*Ibid.*, p. 15-17.

7.—R. L. Yaple, "The Auxiliaries; Foreign and Miscellaneous Regiments in the British Army, 1802-1817," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Volume 50 (1972), p. 19.

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The above illustration is a representation of a PRIVATE, INDEPENDENT COMPANIES OF FOREIGNERS, 1813, by Eric I. Manders. It is based upon Charles Hamilton Smith, *Costume of the Army of the British Empire* (London, 1815), particularly the color schematic for these companies and a uniform plate of the York Light Infantry Volunteers. Other details are patterned after British models for their light infantry. UNIFORM: Dark green jacket with black collar, cuffs and shoulder straps, all piped with white, and white metal buttons; officers would have had silver buttons and black lace. Gray pantaloons and gray or black gaiters. Black shako with white metal badge and green plume. ACCOUTREMENTS: Black cross belts with brass plate; black cartridge box and bayonet scabbard with a brass tip. Black musket sling.

